

Birch Sugaring

By: Rebecca Kennel

Spring was coming and Josephine Daigneault watched from her island home In Lac Ile-a-la-Crosse, Saskatchewan. The sun be-came more intense in the clear air. The snow settled and bare patches of ground began to show through. Warm days meant life was returning to the trees. The sap would be rising in the birch and to Josephine that meant sweet syrup for family and friends. This was what she had been wailing for and she was ready.

The sleds were packed with bedding, a tent, dried moose meat, smoked fish and a large cast iron kettle. Josephine rode in one of the sleighs with her tin pails and para-phernalia. While several grandchildren pulled her. The whole expedition was escorted across the lake to the mainland by aunts and uncles.

Camp was set up in a good stand of birch; the large canvas tent was pitched with an airtight neater inside to take part of the chill out of the still cold nights. Spruce boughs were cut and laid on the frozen ground and homemade feather robes went on top to complete the bed. Here Josephine would stay with five or six of her grandchildren for sometimes a week or more.

With almost three-quarters of a century behind her, Josephine had seen a lot of winter* change to spring and seldom had she missed the chance to tap the rising sap in the birch trees and boil it down to syrup. She had first gone with her own mother, then with her children and now with her grandchildren.

It was with an experienced eye that she selected the trees. Small ones would not produce enough sap. Large ones were rejected as well, her preference being for the medium-sized trees. The same tree was not used two years in a row to give the tree a chance to recover.

With the trees selected, Josephine would make an upwards-slanting cut with her hatchet just under the bark. The resulting curl of bark was propped open with a small twig and it was from this piece that the sap dripped. Tin pails were propped against the tree with a willow stick or tied around the tree with string to catch the watery liquid.

In earlier years, before tin pails were available, Josephine had made her own containers out of birch bark. A square of bark was folded at the corners to make a small watertight box. The corners were fastened with willow roots and the boxes were tied to the trees.

Collecting the filled pails was the responsibility of the children. Some trees yielded several gallons of sap, while others dripped slowly, producing only a few cups of liquid. All of it was carried back to camp where Josephine was boiling it in a large kettle over an open fire.

The boiling of the sap required close attention. A blazing hot fire was needed to keep the liquid boiling. Forty gallons of sap produces only about one gallon of syrup and all this moisture must be boiled off. If the syrup is not cooked long enough, it will be too watery and will most likely ferment. If it is boiled too long it will turn to sugar. Josephine knew what the consistency of the finished product must be; when a few sugar crystals formed around the outside edges of the

kettle, the syrup was ready to be poured off into other containers to cool.

When the pails of sap on the trees did not need tending, there were other things for the children to do. In the open patches where the snow was gone there were cranberries to pick, sweeter now from the winter freeze. Wood had to be gathered to keep the fire under the kettle burning all day long. There were rabbit snares to check for a meal of fresh meat.

There were mischievous times as well. Josephine's large can of tobacco was often dipped into when she wasn't watching and smoked in a sunny spot out of sight. In the woods and with the woods full of spring and with interesting places to explore, work was not always first on the children's list of things to do. Josephine managed to make three to four gallons of syrup every year. Then things would be packed on the sleighs and they would be escorted back across the lake to the small island to enjoy the rest of the year the sweet results of their labor.

Josephine, now 95, still sees spring come from her home in Ile-a-la-Crosse but it has been nearly 25 years since she has made the trip to make birch syrup.

Kennel, R. (1982), *Birch sugaring*, Western People